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ABSTRACT

To determine how integration in informal communication networks may mediate job stress and burnout, data were collected from two public elementary schools in the South at two points in time, with a three-week interval between collections. Questionnaires were completed by teachers at the beginning of a staff meeting. An individual's integration in a network was determined by the frequency of his or her contact with colleagues within each network. Thus, the greater the frequency of communication with more system members, the greater the integration in that network. The system was defined as the teachers and principal. The results indicated that for school 1, positive relationships were found for integration in the job and innovation networks, with frequency of stress, and for the social and innovation networks, with intensity of stress. The more these teachers talked with their colleagues about these topics, the greater their stress. In school 2, however, no significant relationships were found between integration in any of the networks and frequency or intensity of stress. For both schools there was no relationship between integration of any of the communication networks and burnout. (HOD)

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Communication Networks and Job Stress Among Teachers

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Communication Networks and Job Stress Among Teachers

In the last 25 years, the concept of job stress has received increasing research attention (Swent, 1983). Although no profession is exempt from the effects of stress, some--such as teaching--appear to be more susceptible than others. According to Pettegrew and Wolf (1982), "stress is increasingly becoming a recognized occupational hazard of the teaching profession" (p.373). Teachers are reporting increasing levels of stress (Moracco & McFadden, 1982). With educational considerations in a national limelight, teacher stress issues are of great concern.

Stress exacts its costs in a number of areas such as employee physical and mental health, job performance, and absenteeism, turnover, and substandard morale. For example, Ross (1980) states that 50 to 80 per cent of diseases are believed to be stress-related and Fletcher, Gowler, and Payne (1979) estimate the costs of stress in billions of dollars. In addition, when the stress is chronic and not treated, it often results in job burnout.

This paper reviews the literature in job stress and burnout among teachers and presents a study investigating how interpersonal communication may mediate their negative impact.

Job stress

There is no one generally accepted definition of job stress. It has been defined in a number of ways (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978; Moracco & McFadden, 1982). This confusion has been heightened by the use of various terms for the phenonemon--occupational strain, job stress, work tension, burnout, strain, and job demands (Moracco & McFadden, 1982).

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According to Thoresen and Eagleston (1983), stress is derived fro Latin word, stringere, which means "to draw tight" and most definitions of stress emphasize pressure experienced by an individual (Kahn, 1981; Thoresen & Eagleston, 1983). Moracco and McFadden (1982) further define this notion of pressure by focusing on an interactionist view and define stress as "an alteration of psychological homeostatis resulting from aspects of the teacher's job that are perceived as threats to the individual's well-being or self-esteem" (p. 549). Stress can be caused by a number of factors. Environmental or external pressures (e.g., discipline, task overload) can create very stressful situations for teachers. Internal pressures (e.g. perfectionist tendencies, setting unattainable goals) also contribute to stressful feelings. When the demands from the environment exceed the individual's ability to handle them, stress results (Aischuler, 1980).

Much research has examined the effects of teacher stress. Stress may affect individuals physically, psychologically, and behaviorally (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Moracco & McFadden, 1982). Physical responses include respiratory illness, ulcers, hyptertension, insomnia, and cardiovascular diseases (Kahn, 1981; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Psychological responses range from depression and anxiety to paranoia while behavioral reactions include poor work performance, absenteeism, and poor staff relations (Moracco & McFadden, 1982). Research has also found that stressed teachers are more fatigued, more often sick, and take longer time periods to recover from illness than those reporting lower levels of stress (Weiskopf, 1980). In addition, teachers experiencing stress may "distance" themselves

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emotionally and/or physically from students (Moracco & McFadden, 1982).

Burnout

When this stress is chronic, one reaction to it may be job burnout (Cherniss, 1980; Edelwich, 1980; Maslach, 1976). Freudenberger (1977) defines burnout as becoming exhausted from excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources. While exhaustion is the key distinguishing factor of burnout (Schwab, 1983), several other symptoms are associated with it. For teachers, symptoms may include high absenteeism, lack of commitment, an abnormal desire for vacations, low self-esteem, an inability to take school seriously (Bardo, 1979), and general feelings of personal distress (Weiskopf, 1980). As its effects progress, fatigue, irritability, mild depression, boredom, feelings of overwork surface (Weiskopk,1980). Frustration, loss of energy, and hopelessness are likely to follow (Bardo, 1979). If burnout is not reduced, the person will likely withdraw from social contacts and activities and classroom effectiveness will probably decline (Weiskopf, 1980).

In addition to the above symptoms, burnout has been associated with more serious conditions, such as alcohol and drug abuse, marital conflict, psychological problems, and physical illness (Schwab & Ivancki, 1982; Cherniss, 1980; Edelwich, 1980; Weiskopf, 1980).

Obviously, stress and burnout are critical concerns in education today (Wangberg, 1982). Both can have debilitating effects on the process of education, the teacher's personal health, and the delivery of services to students (Weiskopf, 1980). Given the deleterious effects of job stress and burnout, it is important to find ways to prevent them from reaching dysfunctional levels.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of interpersonal relationships in the workplace as a mediator of job stress and burnout. Much research suggests that interpersonal relationships in the workplace help to reduce stress and burnout levels (Albrecht, Irey, & Mundy, 1982; House, 1983; LaRocco, House, & French, 1980; McLean, 1985; Moracco & McFadden, 1982). These relationships are thought to buffer stress by providing social support for the workers. In the burnout literature, the focus has been on the establishment of formal support groups in the workplace as a prevention of burnout (Cherniss, 1980; Daley, 1979; Edelwich, 1980; Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1977). These support groups are thought to provide an environment where workers can "admit failures, share successes, and support one another" (Wangberg, 1982, p. 453).

This study investigated how integration in informal communication networks may mediate job stress and burnout. Previous network research has reported mixed results. Albrecht, Irey, and Mundy (1982) examined the dichotomous network roles of group members and linkers and found that group members reported less stress than individuals in linking roles. Ray (1983a), however, investigated integration in communication networks within the work unit and found no relationship of network integration to either job stress or burnout. Drawing from the theoretic framework of uncertainty reduction and social structure, this study focuses on integration in communication networks throughout the entire organization rather than just the work unit.

Theoretic Framework

The melding of uncertainty reduction and social structure was

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initially articulated by Parks and Adelman (1983) and has since been used as a theoretic framework by Albrecht and Adelman (1984) and Albrecht and Ropp (1984).

Uncertainty Reduction

According to Berger and Calabrese (1975), people communicate in order to reduce uncertainty about others. As this uncertainty is reduced, people are able to describe, predict, and explain the behaviors of others and make sense of their world. People who communicate frequently with one another are able to reduce uncertainty, predict the behavior of the other person, and subsequently develop interpersonal relationships (Miller & Steinberg, 1977). In the workplace, uncertainty is reduced through interaction with colleagues over time. By sharing concerns about job and non-job related issues, workers develop interpersonal relationships that should reduce stress because they provide an outlet for venting stress as well as an informal support group (McLean, 1985).

Social Structure

The frequent interaction necessary to reduce uncertainty is evidenced by examining the organization's social structure. Structure refers to the pattern of linkages that exist between members. These linkages are governed by the organization's informal relationships (Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977). The result is an emergent network based on the pattern of stable communication relationships between people.

By examining the social structure within an organization, it becomes possible to identify the level of integration of each member in informal communication networks. The more integrated people are in a communication network, the greater their interpersonal relationships. These

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relationships should act to buffer both job stress and burnout. Hypotheses 1 and 2 state:

H1: The greater the network integration, the less the job stress.

H2: The greater the network integration, the less the burnout.

Job-related stress and burnout.

Burnout is conceptualized as a reaction to chronic, job-related stress (Cherniss, 1980; Edelwich, 1980; Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976; Ray, 1983a, 1983b). The more frequent and intense the stress, the greater the burnout. Hypothesis 3 states:

H3: The greater the job-related stress, the greater the burnout.

Method

Organizations

The organizations participating in this study were two public elementary schools in the south. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidentiality was assured. A description of each school follows.

School 1 is structured so that classes are team taught by three or four teachers. Students are placed in classes according to their capabilities rather than their grade level. For example, a particular math class may consist of first, second, and third graders all working toward mastery of the same skill. Each teacher has a specialty subject and then teaches it at these various levels. This school is the only one of

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its type located in the city.

School 2 is structured so that each grade is assigned to a large complex area. Within the complex students are placed in one of three levels (high, medium, low) for each of the academic areas. Each teacher teaches each of the academic subjects and is assigned by the principal to that level for each subject. This school has been so structured since its beginning though in the last year has begun to close off the "open" system by building walls within each complex to create a separate room for each teacher.

Data Collection

Data were collected at both schools at two points in time, with a three-week interval between collections. Questionnaires were completed by teachers at the beginning of a staff meeting. Identical procedures were followed for both waves at both schools.

Measurement of Variables

Network Integration. Network integration was defined as the extent to which an individual perceived that he or she communicated with other teachers in the school. Because organizational networks vary according to their content and function (Farace et al., 1977), the three networks of job-related communication, social concerns and support, and innovation were included. Job-related communication included matters such as getting the job done and job performance on a daily basis. Social concerns and support included informal friendly communication and emotional support. The innovative network included communication about new ideas and new ways of doing things related to the job. Each of the three networks was

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examined separately.

An individual's integration in a network was determined by the frequency of his or her contact with colleagues within each network. Thus, the greater the frequency of communication with more system members, the greater the integration in that network. The system was defined as the teachers and principal employed at the school.

Given a roster of all the teachers and the principal, respondents rated how often they talked with each person about the job, social concerns, and innovations on a 5-point scale bounded by "never" at 1 and "several times a day" at 5. The integration score, adapted by Parks (1977) and used in a previous stress and burnout study (Ray, 1983a), was the ratio between the total number of possible linkages within each network at the maximum frequency of communication and the sum of the reported frequencies for each contact, and ranged from 0-1.00.

$$I = \frac{L}{(N-1)P}$$

I = integration

L = sum of observed frequencies of communication

N = network size

P = maximum link strength or frequency of communication

Job-Related Stress. This study is part of an ongoing line of inquiry where stressors salient within each organization are identified by system

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members rather than imposed by the researcher (Ray, 1983a, 1983b; Sypher & Ray, 1984). To determine what stressors were perceived as salient, interviews were conducted with teachers at each school before constructing the stress questionnaire. Over 95% of the teachers at each school participated in these interviews either individually or in dyads during their break period. The stress questionnaire was constructed to include those stressors identified by the teachers in these interviews. Items were rated on 5-point scales for frequency and intensity of each stressor.

Stressors identified by teachers at School 1 were: overload times in the school year; discipline; particular design/structure of classroom; scheduling; lack of parental support; lack of understanding of public toward teachers; lack of rewards; paperwork--filling out forms, etc.; paperwork--grading/reading students' work; parents with emotional problems; children with emotional problems; need for more planning time; planning for different groups/levels; after hours work; too much to do--too little time; inadequate salary; being with children constantly (no breaks); need more aides; eating in lunchroom with students; need time between classes; coordinating within complex; parents who call at home; trying to cover all required curriculum; endless increase of duties each year; and getting quality homework back.

Teachers at School 2 identified the following stressors: paperwork; waiting with kids for busses; lunch-time noise; mainstreaming; politics of the central office; lack of time; having to work during my planning period; lack of breaks; coordinating home responsibilities with work; having no personal days; lack of teacher aides; behavior problems in the

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classroom; large classes; pull-outs; kids who don't fit in either regular or special ed. classes; parents who could care less; pay; separating my personal and professional life; lack of recognition and prestige outside the school; not being treated like a professional; lack of positive feedback from parents; never finishing my work; lack of control over county or state school policies; lack of backup from home for schoolwork and/or discipline; and having no one to cover my room if I have to leave it.

Burnout. The Tedium Scale (Kafry & Pines, 1980) is a 21-item questionnaire that assesses physical, attitudinal, and emotional exhaustion. Items were rated on a 5-point scale bounded by "never" at 1 and "always" at 7, and mean scores were computed. The higher the mean score, the greater the burnout. This scale has been used in numerous burnout studies, with test-retest reliabilities of .79 (Albrecht et al., 1982) and .89 (Kanner, Kafry, & Pines, 1978) and internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) of .84 (Albrecht et al., 1982), .86 (Ray, 1983a), and .87 (Sypher & Ray, 1984). Items included: being tired; feeling depressed; having a good day; being physically exhausted; being emotionally exhausted; being happy; being "wiped out"; being "burned out"; being unhappy; feeling rundown; feeling trapped; feeling worthless; being weary; being troubled; feeling disillusioned and resentful about people; feeling weak; feeling hopeless; feeling rejected; feeling optimistic; feeling energetic; and feeling anxious.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Thirty teachers (86%) participated in the study at School 1. The mean

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age as 30 and 87% were female. Most (61%) were married. Their average length of time teaching was 6 years, with 4 1/2 of them at this school. Most (84%) were employed full-time.

Members communicated regularly with less than half of their colleagues (job network X=.48, sd=.14; social network X=.49, sd=.17: innovation network X=.39, sd=.13). Teachers reported moderate frequency of stress (X=3.10, sd=.76) but this stress was not very intense (X=2.74, sd=.99). Members did not report high burnout (X=2.22,sd=.47).

At School 2, thirty-one teachers (89%) participated in the study. Their mean age was 37 and 84% were female. A majority (71%) were married. On the average, they had been teaching for 12 years and had taught at this school for 9 years. Most (84%) were employed full-time.

Integration in the three networks was not particularly high (job network X=.48, sd=.09; social network X=.48, sd=.13; innovation network X=.39, sd=.10). Members reported a moderate frequency of stress (X=3.15, sd=.66) but this stress was not very intense (X=2.92, sd=.76). Members were also not very burned out (X=2.53, sd=.75).

Reliabilities

The internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for the frequency and intensity of stress and burnout questionnaires. Reliabilities for the frequency of stress measure were .94 in School 1 and .90 in School 2. For intensity of stress, the reliabilities were .96 in both schools. The reliability for the burnout scale was .93 in School 1 and .89 in School 2.

Test-retest reliabilities (Pearson correlation) were computed for frequency and intensity of stress, burnout, and network integration. In

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School 1, the reliabilities were .84 (frequency of stress) and .91 (intensity of stress) and .52 for burnout. In School 2, the reliabilities for the stress scale were .84 (frequency) and .74 (intensity), and .52 for burnout. The reliabilities for network integration in School 1 were .74 for the job network, .83 for social concerns, and .76 for the innovation network. In School 2, they were .71 for the job network, .91 for the social network, and .83 for the innovation network.

(insert Table 1 about here)

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 posited a negative relationship between network integration and job stress. In School 1, several significant relationships were found, but all were in the opposite direction of that hypothesized. Significant positive relationships were found for frequency of stress and integration in the job network ($r=.37$, $p<.05$) and the innovation network ($r=.33$, $p<.05$). Significant positive relationships for intensity of stress were found with the social network ($r=.28$, $p<.10$) and the innovation network ($r=.43$, $p<.05$). In School 2, no significant relationships were found between network integration and frequency or intensity of job stress.

Hypothesis 2 stated a negative relationship between network integration and burnout. In both schools, no significant relationships were found.

Hypothesis 3 stated a positive relationship between job stress and burnout. In both schools, significant positive relationships were found (School 1 $r=.54$, $p=.001$, frequency and $r=.55$, $p=.001$, intensity: School 2 $r=.61$ $p<.001$, frequency and $r=.49$, $p<.05$, intensity).

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(insert Table 2 about here)

Discussion

The results of this study did not support the two hypotheses predicting negative relationships between network integration and job stress and between network integration and burnout. Hypothesis 3, predicting a positive relationship between job stress and burnout, was the only hypothesis supported. There are several possible explanations for these findings.

For School 1, the significant findings were opposite the hypothesized direction. Positive relationships were found for integration in job and innovation networks with frequency of stress and for social and innovation networks with intensity of stress. The more these teachers talk with their colleagues about these topics, the greater (rather than the less) their stress. It is possible that the "contagion effect" occurred (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Cherniss, 1980; Ray, 1983a). Talking about innovative ideas which does not then lead to implementation may be more stressful than not talking about it. Talking about job matters may include discussion about problems with the job, making these problems salient and thereby resulting in more frequent feelings of stress. In the same way, frequent talk about social concerns may focus on individuals' personal crises. By making these crises salient, the result may be more intense feelings of stress. Thus, for this school, it appears that strong linkages between the teachers exacerbates, rather than buffers, stress. This "boomerang effect" may provide the stressed individual attention and allow him or her to wallow in his or her misery (House, 1983).

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It is important to note that during their interviews, these teachers cited talking with the other teachers in their team as very supportive. This study examined linkages throughout the entire system, rather than focusing on the team. Since the team members work together daily and tend to develop strong interpersonal relationships, these interactions may act to buffer stress. On the other hand, talking with other teachers in the school who do not share one's frame of reference may actually prove more stressful.

In School 2, however, no significant relationships were found between integration in any of the networks and frequency or intensity of stress. It may be that at this school the relationships between the colleagues are less interpersonal. For example, their talk about the job, social concerns, and innovations may be casual conversation while more serious discussion taking place with others outside the organization may be the communication which help them cope with stress. In their interviews, numerous teachers stated that they turned to people not affiliated with their school (ie. spouses, friends, teachers at other schools, etc.) for support moreso than to colleagues.

For both schools there was no relationship between integration of any of the communication networks and burnout. This is consistent with Ray's (1983a) findings. This finding is surprising given the emphasis in the burnout literature on support groups as ways of dealing with burnout. It may be that formally established groups may act in a therapeutic way for burned out workers; however, the informal relationships between co-workers in this school did not do so.

This study did find support for the positive relationship between

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frequency and intensity of stress and burnout in both schools. This additional support for such a relationship suggests that given the serious personal and professional consequences linked to burnout, it is important to address ways to alleviate job stress before it becomes chronic.

Implications

This study furthers a previous line of inquiry where stressors were identified within the organization rather than imposed by the researcher (Ray, 1983a, 1983b; Sypher & Ray, 1984). This approach focuses on the distinctive cultural features of each organization by using the language of the organization's members. While there was some overlap between the two schools (ie. lack of aides, pay, and paperwork), most of the stressors differed for the two schools. The interviews allowed us to explore these organizational differences under the stress concept.

Expanding the characteristics of network linkages examined would also be worthwhile. This study focused on network integration, defined as the frequency of interaction. However, quality, in addition to quantity, of interactions is important to consider (House, 1983). As McLean (1985) notes, "Social support from just one important other individual can be quite effective in mitigating the effects of stress" (p. 94). Other dimensions worthy of examination include direction (+ or -), reciprocity, and multiplexity. These, in addition to integration, should provide a clearer picture of any relationship between informal communication networks and job stress and burnout.

It is also important to recognize that different system boundaries may act in different ways in different organizations. Albrecht et al. (1982) examined network integration within the entire organization and found a

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relationship between group membership and stress while Ray (1983a) limited the boundaries to the work unit and found no significant relationship. In these two school organizations, expanding or tightening the boundaries might provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between communication and stress. For example, in School 1, much of the interview talk focused on the notion of the "team" and the importance of the team for support in dealing with daily stress. Examining the linkages between team members could provide insight into how these relationships may buffer stress. In School 2, however, teachers interviewed frequently referred to interactions outside of the organization as being important to them for dealing with stress. In this case, expanding the boundaries beyond the organization might prove more fruitful.

Finally, it should be noted that the teachers in both schools were not very stressed or burned out. These findings are similar to what Ray (1983a) found among nurses in the work unit. It is possible that stress and burnout are not quite the major problems they are so often pictured to be (Falkenstein, 1982; Ray, 1983a). Perhaps it is only a very vocal minority who have been responsible for identifying these as major problems. Or, perhaps stress and/or burnout function to consume the energy of the individual at the time when they occur but once the "crisis" is past, it no longer bears the "crisis" label. Data collected during non-crisis times would thus reflect lower stress and burnout levels. The low test-retest reliabilities for burnout lend support to this idea that burnout is not a particularly stable phenomenon. Or, it is possible that a self-selection factor may be operating in which those teachers who are able to cope remain in the profession while those who have experienced

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high burnout have left it.

The results of this study suggest the complexity of the relationship between communication with job stress and burnout. If future research addresses the issues raised above, a clearer understanding of this relationship should result.

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Table 1

Reliabilities

Scale	Alpha Wave 1	Alpha Wave 2	Test-Retest
Job network integration			
School 1	---	---	.74
School 2	---	---	.71
Social network integration			
School 1	---	---	.83
School 2	---	---	.91
Innovation network integration			
School 1	---	---	.76
School 2	---	---	.83
Stress (frequency)			
School 1	.94	.95	.84
School 2	.90	.90	.84
Stress (intensity)			
School 1	.96	.97	.91
School 2	.96	.90	.74
Burnout			
School 1	.93	.95	.52
School 2	.89	.95	.52

Table 2

Correlation Matrix for School 1

	Job Network	Social Network	Innovation Network	Stress (frequency)	Stress (intensity)	Burnout
Job Network	***	---	---	**.37	---	---
Social Network		***	---	---	***.28	---
Innovation Network			***	**.33	**.43	---
Stress (frequency)				***	*.87	**.54
Stress (intensity)					***	**.55
Burnout						

*p<.001

**p≤.05

***p<.10

Table 3

Correlation Matrix for School 2

	Job Network	Social Network	Innovation Network	Stress (frequency)	Stress (intensity)	Burnout
Job Network	***	---	---	---	---	---
Social Network		***	---	---	---	---
Innovation Network			***	---	---	---
Stress (frequency)				***	*.94	**.61
Stress (intensity)					***	**.49
Burnout						

*p<.001

**p≤.05